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Elena Acosta

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Great Expectations, a Dead Chicken, and My Crazy *Abuela*

By Elena Acosta

Chapter 1

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom really quick. I need to finish fixing my face.” In true Hispanic style, I had been running late, so I still had to finish putting on my makeup.

“Okay, Natalia. I see the girls sitting over there, so you know where to find us.” My roommate Jill made her way over to the table where our other girlfriends had been so patiently waiting.

A full forty-five minutes later than we planned, we had made it to Jill’s favorite place, The League. While it sounds ritzy, The League was Middletown, Virginia’s attempt at reminding us why we didn’t go to school in New York; it was packed, noisy, and over-priced. But their virgin piña coladas were quite delicious, highlighting one of two of The League’s good points. It was the closest place to our campus that served drinks other than sweet tea and Coke, and their wider selection of drinks conjured up the other reason why any self-respecting girl would want to go to The League: the fabulous frat boys. Shallow? Maybe. An understatement? Never. While the quality of these boys was debatable, they sure were beautiful. The League managed to attract James Marsden look-a-likes, Paul Walker’s stunt doubles, and all of Brad Pitt’s long lost little brothers all on the same night, making it Jill and every other single girl’s favorite place.

Eye shadow and mascara in place, I made my way out of the bathroom toward the table where my friends were sitting. It was a Tuesday night, which meant that all the aforementioned types of boys were there taking advantage of The League’s fifty-cent wing night special. I was too busy enjoying the view on my way to the table to notice who else was on his way to my table.

No sooner had I sat down and said hi to all of my friends, than he came sauntering over to our table like he owned the place. Of the three types, Danny Pearce fell into the Paul Walker

stunt double category, only with broader shoulders and a more up-turned nose. He was the captain of the football team and known by name to every female on campus. But before he could ever have dreamt of such possibilities, Danny had been my best friend. That was until he had met my other best friend at the time, Julie; I suddenly had two ex-best friends when she convinced him that they both should dump me and live happily ever after in each other's arms.

It had been one year since either one of them had spoken to me; one year since I had seen his gorgeous face; one year since I had felt so much anguish at the initial shock of betrayal that the idea of getting run over by a bus seemed like a welcome relief. I thought I had made myself forget how much I loved him and how much it hurt to remember, but one look at him made it all instantly come back. Even though I felt like throwing up and passing out at the same time, I made a split second decision to keep myself together for as long as I could control my physical reactions to his presence, anyway.

He looked more beautiful than I remembered as he stood in front of our table; he instantly had every girl's attention as charm radiated from him.

"Hello, ladies. Looking good!"

Who did he think he was? How dare he come over to my table and talk to my friends and pretend that he was a nice person! Two could play at the game of being coy, and I made up my mind to win. Except I had forgotten that playing coy was not one of my strong points, so instead of acting like nothing had happened and listening intently as he proceeded to be charming and funny, I stared down at my feet as though my toes were the most interesting thing I had seen all day. I looked up in time to see him hug everyone goodbye. Well, almost everyone. Danny proceeded to side-hug Katie, Ashley, [skip Natalia], Jill, and Jenn. I could feel myself fighting an involuntary rush of tears. So much for coy. He could have slapped me in the face, and it might

have hurt a little less. As the other girls were still fawning over his delightful visit, I sat there in a state of shock.

Attempting to hold back my tears, I calmly pushed my chair back from the table and grabbed my purse, while mumbling something about the bathroom. As I made my way back through the crowd, I thought of all the ways I could have handled that situation. I could have awakened him to my existence by tripping him as he walked right past me. I could have tapped him on his chiseled shoulder, looked into his blue eyes, and in my sexiest voice expertly cursed him out in Spanish. I could have snickered as he walked away, made every girl at the table remember the small shoe size rumor, laughed hysterically for a few minutes, and then forgotten the whole thing had ever happened. But I didn't do any of those things. Instead of all the things I could have done and still maintained respect for myself, I chose the option that induced the most shame: I unsuccessfully suppressed my tears and started bawling on my way to the bathroom, most likely ruining the Puerto Rican tough-girl rep I had worked so hard to establish.

Only five feet till the bathroom door, four, three, two, one, almost...I hid my blotchy red face from the tiny girls who were too tied up in front of the mirror to notice me skulk into one of the stalls. I sat down on the toilet seat fully clothed, too distracted by the anxious pain in my stomach to put any effort into trying to stifle my sobs.

As I fought the overwhelming desire to throw up and join the ranks of the countless white trash beauty queens who had wrenched their guts out in this very place, I remembered the truth that I first came to know at the tender age of five: boys suck. Why did I let him get to me? I thought I had gotten past the Danny and Julie depression stage, but apparently I was not as over the betrayal as I thought. Seeing his face for two minutes had undone two months of therapy, and

I was already having visions of lighting them both on fire. Seeing Danny made me realize that my sadness over the whole situation was giving rise to a more potent, repressed anger.

I need to calm down and breathe. I wiped the tears from my eyes, while trying to force a giggle at the numerous inscriptions all over the stall door. *Get it together,* I thought, *at least I'm not some chick named "Baby" who "hearts Bubba."* My life could be worse.

Chapter 2

After spending the last 48 hours in bed watching the most pathetic chick flicks I could find at Blockbuster (*Never Been Kissed* and *Clueless* included) as the result of my Danny freak out, I decided enough was enough. As if eating twice my weight in macaroni and cheese and Skittles wasn't sad enough, I had also been ignoring everything but my overwhelming desire to stuff my face. I had been hiding from my family, my friends, my schoolwork, my phone calls, my text messages, my emails, my pet fish, and any other sign of intelligent life, so I decided that the first step to attempting to resume living like a normal self-respecting human being was to get out of bed and call my sister. I figured that after sending me 15 "WTH PICK UP YOUR DANG PHONE!" text messages, she would be delighted to hear from me.

"Hello?" By the sweet way her second syllable went to a higher pitch, I could tell that Issy hadn't looked at the caller ID before she picked up the phone.

"Hey." Wait for it, wait for it...

"What the heck?! Why are you so freakin' heartless? I'm calling my big sister and texting her because I need to talk to her and solve my problems, but she is too busy with her own amazing life to give a crap." My sister's eloquence was only trumped by her extensive vocabulary.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I wasn't purposely ignoring you." Lie. "I've just been really busy this weekend," lie, "and I kept missing your calls." Another lie.

"Ok. Whatever. Listen to my sad story and then tell me what I should do. There's this girl, Rachel, you remember, the little ho I told you about that's always all over Robbie?"

How could I forget? Everything that ever happened in Issy's life was dramatic, a life marked by monumental event after monumental event. She claims that she has no control over

what happens to her, and she blames her dramatic life on the fact that the night she was born was the night when our jerk of a father told my mom that he was leaving our family. My mom swears that the moment she punched my father in the face was the exact moment when the labor pangs started. The current drama in Issy's life was with her new boyfriend Robbie and some girl named Rachel that had been after him since my sister started dating him.

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, listen to this. My friend Katie was walking by the gym this morning, and Robbie was there playing basketball."

"Wow, I'm so sorry. I bet that was terrible because I've heard he sucks at basketball."

"Shut up and listen, I haven't even gotten to the terrible part. Okay, he was playing basketball, whatever. No big deal, right? Well Jess continues walking by the gym, when out of the corner of her eye, she sees someone else. So, being the nosy little chick that she is, she turns around and peeks her head back inside the gym. You'll never guess who else she saw in there."

Hmm...this was a hard one; Rachel? "I have no idea."

"Rachel! That little ho was totally all over Robbie, and his stupid behind was letting her! I'm so freakin' pissed right now, and I feel like not talking to him for the rest of the week. That will make him suffer and cry like the little baby that he is. He's going to be sorry."

Really? Issy not talking to Robbie for a whole week? I'd think he'd be relieved. "You're just overreacting. You need to get his side of the story. Your friend saw only part of the picture, and from what you've told me about her, she's *una exagerada* just like you."

"I never exaggerate!" Silence. "Okay, well, maybe I do, but just a little. Ugh, fine, you're right; I'll give him a chance to tell me why that skank was all over him. But if he still doesn't tell

me after I ask him if there is something that he needs to tell me, I'm gonna let him have it.

Anyways, how are you?"

Freaking out, bugging out, pigging out, the usual. "I'm fine." She didn't need to know how pathetic I was at this very moment. "Hey, Iss, if you could be anybody in a different life, who you would be?" My recent meltdown was leading me to seek wisdom in the most unlikely places.

"Are you kidding? Is this one of your twisted mind questions where you're trying to shrink me?"

"Dang, Issy, just answer the question."

"For real, for real? Hmm...Okay, that's easy. My name would start with an 'N' and it would end with 'atalia,' and I would be the perfect daughter who never got in trouble so my mother wouldn't want to orphan me."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"What? I'm being serious. Mami would disown me now if she could, but according to the laws of being a parent, she has to keep me until I'm eighteen, so she still has three more years to go before she can get rid of me."

"But don't you ever want to get away? You know, escape your life for just a little bit, just to see what it's like to be someone else?"

"And deal with someone else's crap? No thanks, I have enough of my own.

"That's not what I mean; I don't mean to deal with someone else's problems, but taking a vacation from your own problems. You know, to be able to see things through a totally different perspective."

"Hey, you're right, we should take a vacation!"

“What? No, listen...” Did she even hear a word I said? “That’s not exactly what I was...”

“You’re such a genius! Spring break is really soon, and Mami’s been talking for the longest time about shipping me off to Puerto Rico for a couple of weeks, and you need a vacation before your brain explodes from studying so much, so this is perfect!”

“Well, I guess”

“I’m so excited! You usually always tell me about all your intellectual what-not, but this is the best idea you’ve had in forever! Why were you asking me those retarded questions anyway?”

“Well...nothing...no real reason.”

“Natalia, just tell me!”

“I kind of ran into Danny a couple days ago.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me you saw that jerk again?”

“I was about to...”

“Oh no, we are definitely going on a vacation. I’m going to go talk to Mami about it, and you’d better pick up your stupid phone when I call you back. Yay, we’re going to Puerto Rico for spring break! Ok, bye!” Click.

Bye to you, too, baby sister. Even though my sister didn’t hear a word of what I was really saying, a vacation didn’t sound half bad. Momentarily envisioning the beaches and boys, I came to the conclusion that a vacation in a place where running into Danny would not happen actually sounded quite heavenly. As I turned on the shower to wash off the stench of comfort food and candy, I decided that my conversation with my sister had not been a total waste of time after all.

Chapter 3

“Whose idea was this?”

“Mami, it’s a great idea right? Issy and I came up with it together.” My mother never completely trusted the ideas my sister came up with, and I wasn’t in the mood for the torture of selling her on one of them. But I figured half the truth was better than none of the truth.

“I don’t know...”

“Mami, think about it. We’ll get better acquainted with our heritage, see the sights, get a little sun. I really need to relax this spring break and get away. Plus you’ll get a break from grounding Issy. It’s perfect.”

“Well...your sister has been driving me crazy these past few weeks. And I guess *Abuela* has been wanting to see you girls. Last time she saw you and Issy, you were seven and Issy was four. You had just started to read books with long chapters, with your *Little House on the Prairie* book in the corner, and your sister was ordering around her three little boyfriends.”

Oh how the times had not changed. “Ok, Mami, so you’ll call *Abuela* and tell her we’re coming?”

“*Ay mi’ja*. You’re right, it’s a wonderful idea! Your grandmother will be thrilled. You just make sure you keep an eye on your sister.”

“Of course, Mami. Tell *Abuela* that we will be there in two weeks.”

Two weeks until I didn’t have to worry about school or boys or the lack of boys in my life. Two weeks until I could bake in the sun, read a good book or two, and eat my grandmother’s cooking, which I had heard so much about.

It was true that I had not seen my grandmother since I was seven, but Mami used to tell me stories about how people would come from far and wide just to taste her specialty, *pasteles con pollo*.

Every Christmas, our uncle would come visit Massachusetts for the snow, and every Christmas, she would give him a couple dozen *pasteles* to give us. Uncooked, they were a mess of processed raw plantains with chicken thrown in, wrapped in banana leaves. I remember the one time my mother tried to make *pasteles*; it took us two days to clean up the mess, not to mention how sick my sister got from being adventurous and trying one.

But from *Abuela's* hands, *pasteles* were food for the gods, boiled to perfection. Just thinking about it made me salivate like the Pavlovian dogs I had to write a report on. I figured anyone who brought my mouth such Christmas cheer every year was worth visiting.

Chapter 4

“Jill, I’m not so sure about this one.” I looked truly hideous.

“How could you say that? You look absolutely fabulous!”

I wasn’t sure what she was looking at, but I was pretty sure the bathing suit made me look like a hot pink whale.

A few hours earlier, I had been innocently complaining about how I hated my bathing suit when my roommate tricked me into going shopping for a new one.

Natalia, can you come with me? I need to pick out a sarong for Florida and a pair of shoes to go with my new dress.

My ears had perked up at the word “shoes.” *Sure, of course, why not?* I thought. *It’ll be fun.*

It was in front of that mirror that I was reminded of why not. The promise of shoe shopping had temporarily caused me to forget that Jill’s idea of “fun” was dressing me up in clothes that would look cute and feminine on her tiny body but that with my double D’s and big booty made me look like a ten cent hooker.

“Jill, I don’t think this works too well with my body type.” Unless I was going to take up pole dancing. “I think I need a little more . . . support.” I didn’t want people to know exactly when I got cold.

“Okay, well, how about this one?” She held up an identical one in blue with a misleading tag attached at the front. “The tag says ‘full support for the full-figured.’”

God bless her. I knew she loved me and that she was truly trying to help me, but it only made me feel worse. “I don’t really need a new one. Let’s go to Flora’s Fancy Footwear.”

As I was imagining the four-inch heel on the shoes that would be my consolation prize, I saw it. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the glimmer of a deep emerald green suit come from the back of the store. Even before I actually saw it up close, I knew I had found the one.

For the first time in my life, I came out of the dressing room in a swim shop with confidence. The bathing suit halter top gave me the support I needed, with just the right amount of cleavage, and the deep green complimented my olive skin. Even I had to admit that I actually looked . . . good; really good.

“So . . . what do you think?”

My usually gabby roommate was momentarily struck silent, but quickly recovered. “Wow. You look like one of those exotic beach chicks you see on vacation commercials. You know, the ones that come out of the water really slow, with the ‘come hither’ look, saying things in foreign languages, serving drinks to already drunk . . .”

“Thanks, Jill.” I smiled. I knew she was exaggerating, but I did look pretty good. It was just a bathing suit, but a small victory was still a victory.

Chapter 5

I still had a week of midterms before I left for Puerto Rico, but the idea of spring break had been so much more tantalizing than studying for my Abnormal Psychology test or writing my Fundamentals of Counseling term paper that I had decided to procrastinate on schoolwork for a bit and pack. But my bright idea turned out to be not that bright, and the process of preparing my luggage was not going well. I had packed my amazing new bathing suit and various other beachy things, like my towels, sunscreen, and sandals, along with a mini-library of beach reading material including classics like *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Great Gatsby* as well as guilty pleasures like *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Nanny Diaries*. The problem was that my huge suitcase was already mostly filled, and I still had lots more stuff to go.

“Jill, how did you pack so lightly for Florida?” My roommate was a super organized neat freak and apparently an efficient expert packer. She had gotten all her necessities for two weeks packed into a suitcase half the size of mine. “This stuff needs to be packed but it just doesn’t all fit.”

Her bright blue eyes lit up as though she were about to tell me a secret. “It’s easy! You take just what you need.” Coming from anyone else, that obvious statement would have made me sneer and roll my eyes in annoyance, but Jill’s sincerity kept me from being mean.

“Well, okay...what do mean?”

She walked over to my suitcase and starting sizing up my incoherent jumble of stuff. “Natalia, do you really need more than one pair of heels? And are you really going to read all seven of *The Chronicles of Narnia*?”

“Ummm...yeesss.” Jill obviously did not understand how necessary heels and the writings of C.S. Lewis were to my existence, but my feeble yes wasn’t enough to truly convince

her. She quickly undid my past hour of packing by reducing my seven pairs of heels down to two (she bought my argument that I needed a pair to go with black and a pair to go with everything that wasn't black), making me choose three books instead of sixteen, and teaching me the art of rolling my clothes to make better use of the space.

Between the two of us, we were successfully able to close my suitcase with all my stuff inside. Even though I wouldn't be travelling with all the high heels I needed to feel prepared, I was proud and excited that the inside of my now organized suitcase resembled a page out of an IKEA catalog. My carry-on luggage was a different story, but the major battle with the big suitcase had been won, and I didn't want to bother Jill with more of my mess.

"Jill, thanks so much for all your help. I seriously couldn't have done it without you."

"Anytime!" Her big smile let me know she meant it. Of all the girls I had met my freshman year of college, I had lucked out and roomed with the one of the nicest ones. Her luck on the roommate draw was questionable, and I thanked God that she was patient enough to put up with my antics.

I couldn't contain my excitement enough to settle down and continue studying, so I decided to call my sister.

"*¡Ho-la!*" Issy's heavily American-accented Spanish was too good to pass up.

"Listen to you, acting like you speak Spanish."

"Mean-face. Hello to you too."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you, but I just never hear you speak it." Growing up, I had spoken only Spanish with my mother at home, but when I started school, we had both switched to speaking English at home. As a result, my sister's early exposure to Spanish had been much more limited than mine, and while she understood Spanish, she rarely chose to stumble through

talking the language unless she was at a family function faced with an awkward conversation with an obscure family member who didn't speak English.

“Yea, well, I figured I would practice a little before spending time with *Abuela*. Excuse me if my Spanish speaking skills aren't as amazing as yours are. Way to dog my efforts.”

“I'm sorry. You can keep practicing if you want; I'll be supportive.”

“Nah, I'm good. I think I've been getting enough practice in 'cause I've been watching *novelas* for the past few days. Those shows are so good! I actually have to go soon cause my favorite one, *No Te Quiero, Mi Amor*, is coming on in a few minutes, and it's gonna be good. I think this is the episode where Mario is finally gonna find out that Fernanda has been cheating on him with his twin brother Esteban.”

Of course she would love that dramatic garbage. “Fascinating...have you done any other preparing for the trip?”

“I think I'm gonna break up with Robbie.”

Another one of Issy's “relationships” that didn't last? I feigned surprise. “Really? Why?”

“Because he didn't give me a good enough explanation for the whole Rachel thing! You know what he said? He said that she wanted to learn how to play basketball, so he was teaching her. That is the biggest piece of bull I've ever heard.”

“Maybe he was telling you the truth.”

“Whatevs! Plus I want to be free to flirt with all the sexy Puerto Rican boys.”

Ah-ha. The true reason for Issy's latest break-up. “Right...Has Mami said anything about the trip?”

“Yea, you know Mami. She keeps on nagging me about packing and being prepared and all that annoying stuff.”

“Can I talk to her really quick?”

“Can’t you just call her yourself?”

“You two only live in the same apartment. Just go give her your phone.”

“Ugh...fine. Hold on.”

Instead of taking the phone to our mother, I could hear Issy’s muffled yell across the tiny two bedroom apartment. My mother scolded Issy for watching Spanish soap operas as she picked up the phone.

“Ay, *apaga eso*...You shouldn’t be watching that trash...Hello?”

“Hi, Mami.”

“Natalia! *¡Hola mi’ja!* How are you?”

One of the reasons I loved talking to my mother was that she always sounded excited to talk to me; I missed seeing the smile that I knew was on her face.

“I’m okay...I took a break from studying to pack. I just finished.”

“Good for you! I have been telling your sister to do the same, but she just does not listen to anything I say. Maybe you should talk to her because she listens to you.”

“She listens to you, Ma, she just does it when you aren’t looking.”

“Hmp. If you say so. What’s on your mind, *mi niña*?”

“I just wanted to say hi.”

“That’s all?”

“And ask if you had talked to *Abuela*.”

“Ahh...I know my daughter too well. Yes, I talked to her.”

“And...? What did she say about me and Issy coming for a visit? I know it’s a little too late if she said she doesn’t want us to come because we already got our tickets.”

“Why wouldn’t she want you to come? Of course she wants you to come! You and Issy are family, and family means everything. *Abuela* was very excited that you two are going to visit her. She hasn’t seen her two beautiful granddaughters in a very long time.”

“Yay, Mami, I’m so excited! I haven’t been to Puerto Rico in so long, I can’t wait to go to the beach and lie in the...”

“Ohh, sorry, *mi niña*, the oven is beeping. I don’t want the chicken to burn. I’ll talk to you later!”

“Bye, Mami! Love you!”

“I love you too! Here is your sister.”

“Hey...” Issy’s distracted voice told me she was currently engrossed in the lives of Mario, Fernanda, and Esteban.

“Mami said to pack your stuff.”

“I know, I know, I will, just after this episode.”

“Ok, well, see you in a week.”

“See ya, bye.”

Click. One more week until paradise.

Chapter 6

The idea of spending spring break on *La Isla Del Encanto* made my week of midterms fly by. I aced all my tests, and nothing, not even Dr. Miller's surprise essay on the Social Psychology midterm, could get me down. I even saw Danny out of the corner of my eye walking across campus on my way to my room after my last test, and all I could think about was the fact that I was going to be on a beach surrounded by a hundred better-looking Puerto Rican men.

My reverie was broken as I remembered my mother's warning about Puerto Rican men. "Mi-ja," she always said, "be careful with those *puertorriqueños*. They'll sweep you off your feet, and then drop you on your booty." But then she would smile, rub her backside, and end it with, "but it's a good thing God gave us extra padding." I always remember Mami saying how when she met my father, he was the sweetest guy, but when he left her for another woman after five years of marriage and my sister about to be born, she realized she had married a smooth-talking con man. Apart from my mother's sporadic venting in the form of dating advice, I didn't know much about the man except that I looked exactly like him.

The thought had crossed my mind more than once that, because of our similarities in appearance, I must have been a daily reminder to my mother of the pain my father had caused her. I had mentioned it once to my mother who scolded me for such a thought. She then told me that the only reason why she could not hate my father was that he had given her me and Issy. She told me that even though he had hurt her deeply, she focused on the fact that Issy and I were a constant reminder of how much joy he had brought into her life.

From time to time my mother would confide in me that the fact that we didn't have a father in our lives concerned her. I would always reassure her that Issy and I were fine, but I could tell she never bought it. Mami knew that my over-dedication to my schoolwork was my

way of coping, which didn't worry her much, but she could see my sister dealt with not having a father by flitting from boy to boy. Sometimes I wondered if we would have turned out very differently if our father had stayed in our lives. And then I remembered what a jerk he was and came to the conclusion that we were better off without him. *Good riddance*, I thought as I came back to reality, entered my room, and gathered my things to go to the train station to pick up my sister so we could go to the airport.

Chapter 7

“You’re late.” Impatience was a trait my sister and I shared, and I could tell she was not happy that she had to wait an extra half an hour at the train station after having travelled the ten hours from Massachusetts to Virginia.

“Sorry, Issy. There was a lot of traffic on my way over.” That statement was mostly true, but I decided to leave out the part about me leaving campus later than I had planned.

“Sure there was. Hi, Jill!” Jill had come with me so that she could drive my car back from the airport.

“Issy! O-em-gee, you’re so gorgeous! You’ve matured so much since the last time I saw you!”

“Don’t flatter her too much, Jill. That maturation is purely physical.”

“I am too mature!”

“Okay, Ms. Maturity, put your stuff in the trunk before you make us late.”

“Me make us late?! Whatever. Can I drive?”

I ignored my sister’s question as I helped her put her stuff in my trunk and mentally tabulated how much time we had to get to the airport on time. It was now 1 pm, and our flight left at 3:30 p.m., which left us with half an hour to make it to the airport and still have enough time to get checked-in and get through security. The problem was that the airport was a good hour from the train station. I wrote it off as a minor problem.

“Natalia, slow down!”

The last forty minutes of Issy’s protests weren’t enough to faze me. “What are you talking about? I’m not even going that fast!”

“Not that fast? Are you serious? What happened to my goodie-two-shoes sister? Does she always drive this fast?” My sister didn’t have the regular pleasure of driving with me, so she was shocked every time I went over the speed limit.

“Yes. She’s been worse than this though. Come to think of it, eighty is pretty normal.” Jill had become accustomed to my efficient way of driving.

“You just cut that guy off! You almost had an accident!”

“Relax, there was enough room for another car in there. Anyways, we’re almost to the airport. That sign says we’re two miles away.”

“Thank God! Seriously, Jill, I don’t know how riding with my sister hasn’t given you a heart attack.”

“She hasn’t crashed into anything yet.” I love Jill.

“How encouraging.”

“I don’t appreciate you doubting my awesome driving skills, Issy. Look, we are here, no accidents. Thanks to me, we will have enough time to get checked-in and through security without rushing. You’re welcome.”

“It would have been your fault if we had been late!”

“That is beside the point. Now have your ID and ticket confirmation ready to go.” I mentally patted myself on the back for an accident-free, cop-free ride to the airport. As much as I broke speed-limit laws, it still amazed me that I had never gotten a ticket or even been pulled over by a cop. I attributed it to both my mad skills and good luck. “Thank you so much for taking my car back, Jill. I really appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Natalia. You girls have an awesome time in Puerto Rico! Don’t break too many hearts!”

Aww, she was too cute. “You too! Bye!”

As my sister and I made our way into the airport to the line for the check-in desk, I could feel dread overtaking the excitement I had been experiencing. I wasn’t a huge fan of flying, but I absolutely hated airports. The long lines, the layovers, the huge crowds of people, the antiseptic smell, the tedious security procedures, I hated every inch of it all. I had an overwhelming fear that they might mistake me for a terrorist and detain me in some tiny room. Some might call that an irrational fear, but it was valid for me and had been perpetuated by every airport experience I had ever had. Every time I went through the metal detector, I somehow managed to be the one selected for a “random” bodily search, and every time airport security searched my carry-on luggage because it looked “suspicious.”

Today proved to be no exception. After successfully making it through check-in with minimal hassles, Issy and I carefully approached the security check point. I had to talk myself through it: *take your shoes off, take your belt off, take your phone out of your pocket (breath), put everything in the plastic bin, and you’re good.* Halfway through the repetition of my security check point mantra, a very official looking little man with “Security” plastered all over his clothing was quickly approaching. I hastily put all my personal items in the bin and was about to attempt a fast break through the metal detector, but it was too late.

“Ma’am, could you please come with me this way?”

Why me? “Is something wrong, sir?”

“Just procedure, ma’am,” he said with a big smile. The security guard’s tiny stature and the fact that this man was way too excited to be working security at an airport made me dub him Happy Dwarf from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. “Step this way please.”

Grabbing my shoes, belt, and cell phone in one hand, and my carry-on luggage in the other, I rushed to keep up with him. Happy Dwarf led me through the crowd to a special line in front of a metal detector on crack where a couple of dangerous looking people were waiting to go through.

“Please place your personal items in this bin, put your carry-on in the x-ray machine, and then walk straight through.”

His instructions sounded simple enough, but the actual action of walking through the machine was not. Puffs of air that hit my hair, my face, my neck, going down my body momentarily disoriented me.

“Come out this way, Miss.” The same little security guard beckoned me forward.

No strip search? No drug-sniffing dogs? No sweaty interrogation room? I could see the lady inspecting the x-ray machine pointing at my carry-on and whispering something into Happy Dwarf’s ear.

“Miss? We’re going to have to open your carry-on luggage.” Did he always have that annoying smile on his face?

“Umm...okay.” Jill had not worked her magic on my carry-on luggage, and I was slightly embarrassed at the mini-hurricane contained therein.

“The x-ray machine has detected some questionable items, and we are going to empty your carry-on, Miss. We need to see all the items that you have inside to be sure that your carry-on luggage is in compliance with all TSA air travel regulations.”

While trying my hardest to make sure my irritation was apparent by rolling my eyes and huffing and puffing, I watched as Happy Dwarf slowly pulled my things, one by one, out of my

carry-on luggage. My blow dryer, my tooth brush, a magazine, my matching polka-dotted bra and panty set, the extra pair of heels I had managed to sneak by Jill...

“Okay, Miss, we’ve seen what we needed to see. You can reassemble your luggage on that back table.”

Huh? I am sure the confusion was apparent on my face. “What was the problem? What were the questionable items that you needed to see?”

“The x-rayed image of your carry-on bag showed what appeared to be a concealed dangerous weapon. But it seems to only have been your high-heeled shoes.”

“Oh.” Dang it, Jill was right. I was mad that I had to “reassemble” my carry-on bag that Happy Dwarf had so graciously disassembled, but I breathed a sigh of relief to be done with airport security.

“Natalia!” I could hear Issy frantically yelling my name across the airport security area, but I couldn’t see where she was, so I yelled back.

“Issy? I’m over by the tables!”

“Oh my goodness, there you are! Don’t you ever leave me by myself in this airport again!”

“Shh, relax. No need to get loud, you don’t want to make them suspicious of us. They might make me do more security garbage. What’s our gate number?”

“I don’t know.”

“Issy, just look at the ticket. What does it say?”

“Oh...it says 25D.”

“Ok, that means that we need to get to terminal D. We are in terminal A now, so we have to find the shuttle.”

After a few minutes of unsuccessfully trying to employ some of Jill's organized packing techniques, I gave up and utilized my own method and sat on top of my carry-on to persuade it to zipper shut. We located the shuttle and then spent the next half an hour going through the maze of an airport to find gate 25D only to read the helpful little message on the display board that flight 8687 had been delayed 2 hours and was now going to depart from gate 16A.

"Well, we have plenty of time to get back to terminal A. We don't have to rush or anything." I blamed my optimism on the endorphins released from our recent workout of running around the airport.

"So we have to go all the way back to where we came from? That's so retarded! My feet hurt 'cause you made me run."

"Yea, I know, I'm sorry. Come on, let's go back." I tried my best to ignore Issy's protests and critique of the airport as we made our way to gate 16A. My heart stopped beating nervously, and I felt relieved as I plopped myself and my belongings down in the 16A waiting area, but apparently Issy's protests were not over.

"What are we going to do for two hours? There is nothing to do here, and I'm gonna be so bored!" I wasn't sure if Issy truly feared being bored or she just enjoyed being dramatic. It was probably a little of both.

"I'm gonna read one of my books. You can borrow one if you want."

"You're such a geeeeeek. Whatever, I'll just mess with my phone."

As I was rifling through my bag trying to decide which book to read, I saw that Issy "messing with her phone" actually meant Issy taking a picture of herself. And another picture. And another. I counted my sister take twenty-three pictures of herself in various poses (many of which involved some sort of puckered fish lips) in less than two minutes.

“Are you bored with yourself yet? I think any one of my books is more interesting than taking five hundred of the same picture of yourself.”

“You’re right! I shouldn’t just take pictures of myself; I should take pictures of other people too! Let’s do it.”

Did she ever listen to a word I said? “That’s not what I meant.”

“Come on, you know you want to! It’s so much fun!”

“Issy! No!”

But I was too late. I could see in her eyes she had already selected her unknowing victims: a middle-aged married couple who looked like they had escaped from the 1980s, complete with matching track suits, plastic sunglasses, and big hair. The man even had an awesome porn star mustache.

“Come on, Natalia, they are so perfect! I mean, look at those classic outfits. They just want people to look at them. We have to get a picture of them for The Book.”

“Shh! You are so mean! And they might hear you!” I was scolding her, but the awful part was I was yelling at her as a way to contain the intense laughter I could feel wanting to escape my lips. The Book that Issy was referring to was a scrapbook of pictures of complete strangers who we felt were worthy to be photographed, which in most cases meant the weird looking people everyone notices but never acknowledges. It was a horrible pastime that Danny, Julie and I had started as a joke, which Issy then took and turned into a serious art form.

From a very large Samoan man wearing a tiny pink Speedo to an old Caucasian woman with a blond up do that seriously resembled dinosaur spikes, we now had hundreds of photos of strangers, each more ridiculous than the next. The track-suited couple was too good to resist, so I gave up trying to stop my sister and assisted her instead.

Adding to *The Book* was one of the few times Issy and I worked extremely well as a team. I would pretend to pose for a picture in the vicinity to the right of the unsuspecting person (or in this case, persons), and Issy would expertly move the camera slightly to the left as she snapped the photo. This method usually provided us with a perfect shot of the fashion offender (or in this case, offenders) mid-sentence looking like they were about to sneeze. We had almost gotten caught once or twice, with a group of Asians in Mickey Mouse outfits giving us the evil eye stare down, but the key was to never make eye contact.

After we had gotten the perfect shot of the jogging couple (his mouth was open, displaying the largest chunk of chewing gum I have ever seen, and her half-closed eyes made her look like she was about to have a seizure), Issy and I entertained ourselves by taking pictures of everything and anything until we heard our boarding call. Our silly distraction had made me forget why we were even at the airport, but the announcement for zones one and two to begin boarding made me remember in an instant, and I could feel my stomach drop at the thought of take-off.

“Do you think they’re gonna have good food on the flight? I’m hungry.” How could she be hungry at a time like this? I always made fun of my sister for always being hungry, and apparently Issy’s bottomless pit of a stomach was no respecter of time or place.

“Umm...I have no idea. Issy, I don’t feel so good.” My sister’s look of actual concern made me aware that I probably looked as bad as I felt.

“Natalia, what’s wrong? You look green!”

My current flying-nervousness nausea was taking me back to the last time I felt nauseous, which was when I saw Danny at *The League*. The thought of him made me feel even more nauseous, turning itself into a vicious cycle.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

After succumbing to the vicious cycle of nausea and vomiting in the airport bathroom, I did feel a little better, but not well enough to enjoy the lift-off of a huge piece of metal that was ascending 30,000 feet into the air. I pushed the thought that the plane might just fall out of the air at any given moment aside, and I shoved my ear buds in as soon as the captain announced the okay on electronic devices. I was asleep and drooling on myself within five minutes, thankfully oblivious to my surroundings.

Chapter 8

¡Bienvenidos a Aguadilla, Puerto Rico!” As the three hour flight from Orlando, Florida to Aguadilla, Puerto Rico was coming to a close, the voice of a disgustingly chipper flight attendant awoke me. I opened my eyes; the past couple hours of running to catch the connecting flight, sleeping on cramped benches, and fighting flying nausea all came back. In my sleepy haze I stared out the tiny plane window to what might have been a beautiful sight during daylight, but at four in the morning was nothing more than darkness and a few scattered lights.

“Issy, wake up.”

“Hmm...”

“We’re here, and we’re about to land. Time to get your stuff together.”

“But... I don’t wanna.” Waking my sister up was never fun. There were times when I thought she was awake when she was really asleep, and when that happened, she had the tendency to throw a few punches. She would always claim that she didn’t remember and the swings were not on purpose, but I had a hard time believing that was the case.

“Come on, Iss. Let’s go.” We made our way off the plane, following the sleepy mob. The sweet Caribbean breeze was warm and sticky even in the early morning, and I could taste the salt in the air as we walked across the tarmac of the tiny airport.

“Look, Issy!”

“Hmm?”

“The palm trees! This is so exciting!” The warmth and the palm trees were stirring me out of my exhausted stupor and reminding me of the reason I was here. I could already feel the sand creeping into my bathing suit and the sun burning my face, and it was making me giddy.

“Can I take a quick nap?” Issy stopped by a bench by the entrance to the airport, ready to fall asleep where she fell. I guided her to the door before she became dead weight on a bench.

“We’re almost there.”

For some reason my suitcase seemed a lot heavier at four thirty in the morning than it had the afternoon before. My sister had finally woken up enough to be hungry, and after we got our luggage, she busied herself testing all the vending machines on our way to the pick-up area until she found one that had what she was looking for.

“Humsss abuuuula?” I made a face at the chocolate cake snack falling out of Issy’s mouth as she tried to ask me something.

“Let’s try that again, this time without spitting cake at me.”

“Ha, sorry. Where’s *Abuela*?”

“She should be right over there waiting for us.” Scanning the faces of the all the people waiting for their loved ones, I didn’t see a female face I recognized. I did, however, see a vaguely familiar older man with a broad smile motioning and waving in our direction.

“Natalia, do we know that old guy?”

“I don’t know. He looks familiarish. Maybe he’s related to us or something.” Even though we couldn’t figure out who this man was, he apparently knew us.

“¡Nataliaaaaa! ¡Issssabella! ¡Vengan pa’ca!”

As soon as he uttered Issy’s name, I remembered. “That’s Ramón! *Abuela*’s husband, our step-grandpa!”

I didn't recognize him right away because time had withered him a bit from the man that my seven-year-old self remembered. But his affected, wonderfully lazy country Spanish was a sound I could never forget.

“*¡Ramón! ¡Hola! ¡Hace tanto tiempo!* How are you?” Issy and I ran to give him a hug and a kiss. He smelled of aftershave and second-hand cigarette smoke, and he gave the best bear hug I could ever remember receiving.

“Oh mai ga! Ju tu are so beeg and beyutiful!” His old Puerto Rican man accent brought a smile to my face.

“*¡Gracias, Ramón!* Where's *Abuela*?”

“Chee had to guake up earl-ly, so chee hask me to pick ju up.”

Ramón loaded our things into his old Jeep as he jabbered away in Spanish about how much we had grown and how excited he was to see us. I tried my hardest to smile and nod as Ramón was talking to me and stay awake on the twenty-minute trip back to *Abuela*'s, but that was too physically taxing at this point. Issy fell asleep right away, and I lasted a whole two minutes before my drooping eyelids won the battle.

Chapter 9

The sunlight and the rooster were competing as to who could wake me up first. The rooster won.

“Cu-cu-roo-roo!”

It felt like I had slept five minutes as the rooster’s crow irritated my ears. When was that thing going to shut up? As tired as I was, I decided that I wasn’t going to get any more rest with that rooster alerting everyone to his presence every five minutes. What time was it? I opened my eyes, and the searing sunlight temporarily blinded me as I felt around for my cell phone to check the time. 9:36 a.m. on a sunny Tuesday morning. The busy class schedule and difficult midterm exams that had been my world less than twenty-four hours ago seemed to be so far away. I did some morning stretches, satisfied that I was officially on spring break.

I rolled over on the full-sized bed Issy and I were sharing to see if she was awake. When I turned my head I saw her waving her arm around like a maniac as she searched for cell phone service.

“There’s no service in this room! How am I supposed to survive without texting?”

I think even the rooster could hear me rolling my eyes. “You’ll find some way, I’m sure. There has to be somewhere around here that has service. Let’s walk around and see.”

I poked my head out of the cramped guest room to find an empty, silent house. We made our way through the humid hallway into the small kitchen. Even though it was an older kitchen, everything was impeccably clean. The tile floors shone, the refrigerator was whiter than my teeth, and the countertop looked like I could eat off it. The only things out of their place in the antibacterial world were two covered plates.

“Hmmm...food!” The sight and scent of food distracted Issy from her need for cell phone service to satisfy her other more immediate need to eat. She uncovered the plates to unveil heaping portions of eggs, mashed plantains, and cheese and without a moment’s hesitation, she inhaled her food.

I gave her a “you’re such a greedy face” look and began poking at my breakfast. Whenever I shared a meal with my sister, I was always in awe at how much she ate and how she never seemed to add any weight to her slim figure. Even though we were sisters from the same mother and father, we didn’t look much alike. We had the same nearly black, almond-shaped eyes, but that was where the similarities ended; I was 5’ 3”, curvy, and olive-skinned, while Issy was 5’ 8”, slender, and fair-skinned. The huge family butt had skipped her, while I had gotten doubly blessed, and she always stayed skinny no matter what junk food made its way into her mouth, while even looking at a Snickers bar for too long made my jeans feel tighter.

The squealing of tires coming up the road interrupted my train of thought, and I pushed away my half-eaten breakfast.

“Is that *Abuela*?”

We raced outside to see a red-faced woman in her mid-sixties with dark, short cropped hair in a cherry red Mitsubishi skid into the driveway and come to a screeching halt.

“*¡Mis niñas!*”

“*¡Abuela!*”

Issy and I ran to greet *Abuela* with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was more wrinkled and darker than I remembered, and she smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and a musky perfume.

“*¿Tienen hambre? ¿Comieron la comida?*”

Issy's eyes squinted and her forehead contorted as she tried to figure out what *Abuela* had said.

“She wants to know if we're hungry and if we've eaten yet.”

“I know what she said! It just took me a second.”

“Ju tu arre goin to glearn espanich here! *¡Pa' que aprenden!*” For a second I found it strange that her determined smile didn't match her loud tone, but then I remembered. Regardless of whether she was happy, sad, or excited, *Abuela's* naturally loud resonance and raspy smoker's voice caused her to always sound angry. Compared to Ramón's lazy flow of words, as *Abuela* chattered about how excited she was that we were there, it sounded like the rapid firing of a handgun.

As we helped *Abuela* bring in the bags of groceries from the car, I couldn't help but be distracted by my surroundings. While they had neighbors to the immediate right and left of them, *Abuela* and Ramón lived on a piece of land that stretched back quite a ways. It seemed strange to me because I knew it was a pseudo-mini farm since they had chickens and cows and various crops further behind the house, but it was my first time being on a farm that was covered in palm trees with mangos and coconuts.

“Ghelo! *¡Despiertate!* Lez go!” *Abuela's* loud, impatient voice snapped me out of my reverie.

“Sorry, I'm coming.” I was barefoot, and I walked back across the thick, carpet-like grass to re-enter the house. When I got back inside, I realized how hot the sun was already; even though I had been outside for only a few minutes, the sweat on my back had soaked through my shirt.

“¿Y quién dejo esto?” *Abuela* held up my half-eaten breakfast, wanting to know who the perpetrator was.

Uh-oh. “Oh, sorry, that was me, *Abuela*. It was really good, I just couldn’t finish it cause I wasn’t that hungry.”

She ended that conversation with an obviously annoyed “hmp,” and proceeded to dump the remainder of my food in a Tupperware container that held scraps. In the same motion *Abuela* put a pot of water on the stove and grabbed some potato-looking things from one of the grocery bags and started peeling them in the sink.

“¿Necesitas ayuda?” I wanted to make the best impression I could, so I figured offering my help was a good way to start.

She gave me a curt “No” and continued cooking without further explanation. I shrugged my shoulders at Issy.

“I’m gonna go find some reception so I can text Robbie.”

“Well, make sure you only text because if you call we’ll get charged roaming fees ‘cause this place is definitely on a mountain in the middle of nowhere.”

“I know, I know!”

I rolled my eyes at my sister as she ran out of the house to go contact her not-boyfriend. I was going to offer *Abuela* my assistance again, but she already seemed like she had everything underway. I took it as an opportunity to slip back into bed and read, the perfect way to begin my spring break.

Relaxed, refreshed, and showered, I walked back into the kitchen a couple hours later to find *Abuela* and Ramón finishing their lunch.

“*¡Bienvenida de nuevo! Ju deesapeerd!*”

“Yea, I read for a little bit, then I took a nice shower.”

She responded with a familiar “hmp” as she started shoveling mounds of food onto an empty plate. “*¿Tienes hambre?*”

“Umm...well...” I started to respond too late to say no as she placed a plate with huge servings of food in front of my face. “Sure...thanks. *¡Hola, Ramón!*” Ramón gave me a toothy grin and blew me a kiss from the porch where he had moved to fiddle with a piece of wood and a knife.

“*¿Y Isabella?*”

“She’s in the shower.”

“*¿Todavía?* Deedn’t che get in ficteen meenutes ago?”

“Umm, yea, I guess.” I was too focused on how I was supposed to finish the immense pile of food in front of me to look up and see the annoyed expression I knew was on *Abuela*’s face.

After Issy finally finished getting ready, *Abuela* decided she needed some fresh fruit that she couldn’t find in her yard, so Ramón, Issy, and I climbed into her bright red Montero to go with her to the open air market.

Abuela seemed to gain a second wind of energy as she climbed behind the wheel, and as soon as she yelled, “*¡Aguántense!*” I made sure my seatbelt was securely fastened.

Driving on windy, narrow roads down the mountain at seventy miles an hour made me alternate between sending up prayers and rattling off a series of swear words. *Abuela* was oblivious, loudly complaining and gesturing at any cars on the road that slowed her down. I had to cover my eyes toward the end of the descent because the stress of thinking my life was about

to end at any moment was too much. When I did open my eyes for a second to see if we were still on the side of a mountain, I was surprised to find a calm Issy smirking in my direction.

“Why are you giving me that ugly face?”

“I guess we know now where your mad driving skills come from.” Issy lifted her hands to put air quotations around the word “skills.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You and *Abuela* are exactly the same when you drive. You think you’re the best driver and that everyone else can’t drive, when all you do is scare the crap out of everyone who’s in the car with you.”

I made an equally ugly face in response. “Shut up. Stop being a hater just ‘cause you can’t drive like me...or drive at all for that matter.”

After the initial shock of driving down the mountain, the rest of the ride to the open air market went smoothly. We drove down a dirt road and pulled up to a wide gravel parking lot facing a field with about ten rows of tents and tables. Calling the layout of the tents and tables rows was being generous; what my brain categorized as rows was really a bunch of scattered stands that had little semblance of organization. The only consistency among the tents and tables was that each one was decorated with a dozen or more Puerto Rican flags of all shapes and sizes, just in case anyone forgot what island we were on.

Abuela had called it a market, but what I saw looked more like an overgrown yard sale that had carnival food. There were a couple of tables that had fresh produce, but most of the tables had just a bunch of random old items for sale. We followed *Abuela* to where the fresh fruit was, but I got side-tracked by the ice cream truck parked among the tables. *Piña, coco, vainilla, canela...* As I read the list of flavors I found that I was salivating, but stopped when I read *maíz*.

Corn flavored ice cream? I made a face as I thought about how disgusting that sounded and ran down the “row” to catch up with the others.

I didn't see where Issy or Ramón had gone, but I could hear *Abuela* before I spotted her in front of one of the tables doing what she probably thought was haggling. It was actually just some old farmer getting insulted and yelled at until he caved and gave *Abuela* the price she was demanding. Poor guy. I saw that the table next to the frightened farmer was selling travel guide books which were wedged between cigars and lollipops. Excited to add to my book collection, I asked the man behind the counter, “¿Cuánto?” and promptly handed him the cash amount he had mentioned.

“*Natalia, ¿cuánto pagaste por ese libro?*”

Abuela suspiciously eyed the man who had sold me the book, and as soon as I answered her question and told her how much I had paid, her face turned a darker shade of red.

“¿*Ladrón!*” She loudly called the man a thief and demanded that he return half my money or else she was going to report that he was charging tax on his merchandise but not paying those taxes to the government. He mumbled something about it just being business, but apparently *Abuela*'s threat held some weight because he did return half of my money. She then yelled at me for paying full price and not knowing how to haggle.

Did this woman ever take a rest from being so intense all the time? As I contemplated how my grandmother had not suffered a heart attack or aneurism, Ramón and Issy ran up to meet us with their hands behind their backs.

“So-prise for ju!” Ramón excitedly held out his hands which were holding two ice cream cones. *Abuela* made a face and waved him off, but as soon as I saw the creamy substance I had been lusting over just a few minutes before, my mouth started watering again.

“Yay, thank you, Ramón! *¿Que sabor es?*”

He gave me a funny, knowing smile. “*Es helado de maíz.*”

I couldn't help but make a face at the disappointment of getting the exact flavor that I didn't want.

“You have to try it! I know it sounds gross, but it's so good!” I knew Issy was trying to be convincing and reassuring, but I was still skeptical because I knew my sister's constant hunger did not make her the best judge of taste.

“Umm, okay, if you say so.”

I took a slow, careful lick of the grainy, yellowish ice cream. What I had expected to taste like frozen creamed yellow corn actually tasted quite different. The ice cream did have a distinct corn taste, but it was more of a sweet corn mixed with cinnamon taste.

“Hmm...This is...good. Really good. *¡Gracias, Ramón!*”

Abuela made a comment about how her knees hurt and that she was tired of being there, so we made our way through the oversized yard sale back to the car. I only felt slightly nauseous on the car ride back up the mountain and the contents of my stomach remained intact, but that probably had something to do with the fact that I closed my eyes and pretended I was riding the world's longest roller coaster the whole way back.

We spent the whole second day of our trip in the house not doing much. I read one of my books, and Issy texted and complained about being bored all day, so *Abuela* and Ramón's after dinner ritual of playing dominoes with a couple of the older men from around the neighborhood was going to be our exciting highlight.

“Ju gwant to play?” Ramón had set up the little card table and the domino set on the porch waiting for everyone to arrive.

“I don’t know how.”

“¡Venga, te enseño!”

Even though I wasn’t very good at games and didn’t like playing them because losing wasn’t my idea of a good time, I said yes because Ramón seemed overly eager to teach me. I put down the plate I had just finished drying and followed Ramón outside to the porch.

It took me a couple of practice rounds to get the basic concept that kept the game moving; matching the five dots on one domino to the five dots on another domino was easy enough. But that was as far as I got. When everyone got there and *Abuela* and Ramón sat down to play with their friends, I learned that dominoes was a game of skill and strategy. I watched as all the players, especially *Abuela*, took the game very seriously. Whenever she was losing, she would yell obscenities at whoever her partner was for not paying attention and playing stupidly.

Issy had come out to the porch to watch with me, and it was quite the entertainment to see *Abuela* school all the neighborhood sages, including Ramón.

“She’s kinda scary when she plays.”

“Issy, she’s kinda scary most of the time. But at least it’s not directed at us.”

I knew that I had spoken too soon when I saw Ramón waving at us to go sit down with them. I guess the old men of the neighborhood could take getting beaten by *Abuela* for only so long, so now it was our turn. Ramón quickly explained to Issy the concept of how to play.

“I want Ramón to be my partner!” Issy smiled sweetly in my direction as I grimaced at her long enough so that only she would notice.

“Ok, well I guess that means I’m with *Abuela*.” *Abuela* made no attempt at hiding her loud “hmpf,” and the game began.

Either Issy was experiencing beginner’s luck or she was just a natural at dominoes, because she and Ramón won all of the six games that we played. I didn’t want to be a sore loser and storm off just because I was losing, but I did want to leave because I didn’t know how much longer I could take *Abuela* yelling “¡No! ¿Qué estás haciendo? ¡Natalia, aprende a jugar!” and various other colorful Spanish words in my ear. Luckily, after the sixth defeat, *Abuela*, apparently sharing my sentiments, left the table saying she was done playing because it was late and she needed a cigarette before bed.

I happily obliged. After helping Ramón put everything away, I ran to my room to grab a book and made my way back to the porch so I could read and enjoy the warm night air at the same time. It was only about 9:30 p.m., and I knew that I was nowhere near being sleepy enough to fall asleep in the small, sticky guest room.

“¿Qué estás leyendo?” *Abuela* had finished her cigarette break and was coming in for bed. This was the first time *Abuela* had expressed any interest in anything I was doing, so I tried to give her a complete answer.

“*Es una historia romántica de una muchacha y un muchacho en los mil ocho cientos. Se llama ‘Pride and Prejudice.’ En español creo que se llama ‘Orgullo y Prejuicio.’*”

“*Hmph. Suena raro. ¿Por qué quieres leer de orgullo y prejuicio? A veces hay que hacer mas y leer menos.*”

I mumbled an under enthusiastic “*buenas noches*” and felt myself fuming a bit over *Abuela*’s sound advice of “do more and read less.” But all was soon temporarily forgotten as I lost myself in the perfect literary world of Elizabeth Bennett and the handsome Mr. Darcy.

The next morning I awoke with a strong desire to make rooster soup as the song bird with his piercing melody would not let me sleep. I turned over in the bed to see Issy staring intently at the ceiling.

“What’s so interesting?” I kicked the semi-damp sheets off my body to cover Issy’s face.

“Ah, gross nasty sweaty sheets! Nothing really...I’m just so freakin’ bored I’m counting the swirls on the ceiling design.”

“That sounds like fun, except not really.”

“I just wanna do something! This is our third day in this place and the most exciting thing we’ve done is watch a bunch of old people play dominoes!”

I rifled through my things on the floor and pulled out my flea market find. “I have this tour guide book thing. Maybe we can find something to do here.”

As we paged through the book, we found that Puerto Rico was actually an interesting island with a lot more stuff to do than I would have imagined. There were lots of mountains and caves and a bunch of little surrounding islands that tourists could take boat rides to. All the beaches, of course, looked beautiful, but what really caught my attention were the pictures and description of the rainforest.

“Puerto Rico has its own rainforest? No way! We should totally go *El Yunque*; it would be so awesome!” My sister’s idea of awesome was usually different than mine, but this time I had to agree on the awesomeness factor.

“You’re right, it would be! We should probably make an appearance in the kitchen before she yells at us for sleeping too much. And then we can tell her our idea after we eat breakfast and clean up.”

Abuela barely looked at us as she served us more hot oatmeal than we could eat, but she actually smiled when I complimented her on how good it was. She was in a better mood than I had seen her in since we had gotten there, so as I started washing my dishes I figured this was the perfect moment to ask about going on a rainforest excursion.

In my sweetest, most polite tone, I asked, “*Abuela, ¿puedes llevarnos a visitar El Yunque?*”

She looked at me as if I had told her something hilariously funny and proceeded to cackle which then turned into a raspy cough. “*¿Qué? ¿Pa’ ver palos húmidos? ¡Yo tengo eso aquí!*”

Shut down. What Issy and I thought was a great idea was apparently ludicrous because the wet trees in *Abuela*’s yard were apparently just as good as the ones in the rainforest. I usually would have stayed quiet after such an obvious joy-killing moment, but we were desperately bored, so I tried again.

“Well, what about the beach? *¿Puedes llevarnos a la playa?*”

Abuela’s face had returned to its normal shade of red as she finished wiping down the counter. “*Hmph. Tal vez mañana.*”

I shrugged my shoulders at Issy and mouthed “tomorrow” in her direction; the beach tomorrow was better than nothing. But what were we going to do today? Jill was wrong when she said I wasn’t going to need more than the few books she let me bring because I was already almost halfway through my book supply, and it was only the third day. *Abuela* must have accurately read the “I need something to do” look on my face.

“*Hoy ustedes van a ayudarme con algo afuera. Ponte zapatos.*”

Issy and I put our shoes on and went outside to help *Abuela* with whatever mystery job she had for us. When we walked around 50 feet behind the house, we found *Abuela* among the

chickens holding a sack of chicken feed in one hand and a basket with eggs in the other. She handed me the sack and instructed me to feed the chickens and then gave Issy the basket and gave her the task of collecting the eggs. I threw handfuls of the stuff all around me and watched as the greedy monsters ran into each other trying to eat the same grains. The longer I looked at the chickens, the more I saw how each little one was different from the other. I started mentally naming them (*Rosita, Carmelita, Juanita*), and I was so distracted by what I was doing that I didn't notice that *Abuela* had pulled out a rope with a small loop on the end of it. While the rest of the chickens were busy eating, I watched dumbly as she crept up behind the unsuspecting bird that I had named *Chiquita*. *What is she doing?*

I watched in horror as *Abuela*, in one fluid motion, placed the loop around the neck of the chicken, tightened the rope with one hand as the chicken tried to run away, and snapped its neck with her other hand. Lightheadedness and nausea overtook my system as I dropped the sack. The chickens that were still alive rushed in for the feeding frenzy, and *Abuela* started yelling something I couldn't really make sense of as I ran back into the house with my hands over my mouth, hoping I would make it to the toilet bowl in time.

The carrot I was chopping reminded me of the little orange beak of *Chiquita* the chicken I had seen assassinated a few hours earlier. I was never nor had I ever contemplated becoming a vegetarian; chicken was actually one of my favorite foods. But I guess I had never contemplated the journey from being a live chicken, happily pecking its chicken friends, to KFC crispy deliciousness. I could still see the wildly flapping wings and hear the snap, crackle, and pop of the little chicken neck bones, and it still made my stomach churn.

“¡Natalia, apúrate! ¡Deja de ser tan lenta!”

Abuela's immediate need for the carrots I was chopping made me focus on the task at hand. She was making chicken stew (with the freshest meat anyone could ever ask for...poor *Chiquita*) and decided that I needed to help, a decision I think came from her initial incredulity at the discovery that I didn't really like to cook. I didn't really mind so much; I was just glad she didn't make me help with the process of depluming and cutting up the chicken.

I handed her the cutting board with the carrots. She inspected them, declared that they were chopped too small but would have to do, and threw them into the boiling pot. Even in my nauseated state I could tell that the stew was tantalizing by the amazing aroma filling the kitchen, but I decided that I probably shouldn't eat because I didn't want to risk it.

After *Abuela* dismissed me from my vegetable chopping duties, I sat on the porch admiring the overgrown brush from the neighbor's yard that had crept over the chicken wire fence onto *Abuela's* yard. She constantly complained about her stupid, inconsiderate neighbor and how he refused to tame the plant wildlife on his property. When she said that he refused, he probably just said he would do it next month, for over the past few days I had noticed *Abuela* had a tendency to exaggerate.

"Ya está la comida. Ven a comer."

"Oh, *Abuela*, the stew smells so good, but I can't eat. My stomach hurts, and I'm really not that hungry."

Abuela was not very happy with me or my decision to not eat. "*¿Qué? Jor no hon-gree! ¿Tanto tiempo que pasé en esa concina y no vas a comer? ¡Malagradecida!*"

I winced as the front door slammed behind her. Her parting words of "ungrateful brat" stung a little, but how could she expect me to eat if I still felt like I was going to throw up? I

spent the rest of the day trying my extra hardest to be pleasant and help with anything I could, but I still got yelled at for missing a spot of water on the counter.

The sound of the rooster didn't faze me this time as I rolled out of the bed. Beach day! I stumbled across the room to go to the bathroom. Luckily I saw that there was no toilet paper in time, so I searched all the cabinets and closets in the bathroom. Nothing. It was 7:30 a.m., so that meant that *Abuela* and Ramón had been up for about an hour and a half, and I knew I could find them sitting on the porch where they spent most of their lives.

"*Abuela*, where is the toilet paper?"

"¿*Por qué? Puse uno nuevo antes de ayer.*"

The fact that four people were now using the tiny bathroom instead of two would change how quickly bathroom supplies ran out was obvious to me, but *Abuela* had other expectations.

I kind of mumbled my next statement, hoping she wouldn't make a big fuss. "I guess the new one you put there a couple days ago finished already."

"Why ju tu juse so mush pay-pel! Tree! Ju only su-pose to juse tree pay-pels!"

I wasn't sure if the "are you kidding me" look on my face was because *Abuela* was actually making a big deal about toilet paper or if it was because she expected me to only use three pieces of paper when I went to the bathroom. I mumbled something that resembled an "ok...sorry" as *Abuela* had moved on to complain about something else to Ramón and I went back inside to fend for myself.

After I had searched for half an hour for the toilet paper and found it hidden underneath *Abuela* and Ramón's bed, *Abuela* came in from the porch and announced that she had another

job for me and Issy. My stomach dropped a little as I remembered the last time I had heard *Abuela* say those words, and I felt my eye twitch as I momentarily struggled with the urge to run far away.

“¿*Y la playa?* Are we still going to the beach?”

“*Si, pero después de trabajar.* Ju gotta woark ferst.”

“Okay...What do you want us to do?” In my mind I was praying fervently that the work she had for us did not involve live or dead animals.

Abuela had decided long ago that she was tired of looking at her irresponsible neighbor’s overgrown brush, but sitting on the porch that morning she had the brilliant revelation that she could remedy the offensive eyesore through a little bit of child labor. She reassured us that the job of cutting and trimming the bush wouldn’t take longer than an hour and then we could go to the beach, but it took almost an hour to locate the proper supplies. As Issy and I dug through the dilapidated shed to find tools, we finally found two small shears. They were covered in rust and looked like they were intended for cutting bushes much smaller than *Abuela*’s neighbor’s mini-jungle, but they were the only tools among the hoes and shovels that would get the job done.

“Natalia, my arms hurt.” Five hours and seven blisters later, the renegade hedge had almost been tamed.

“We’re almost done, Iss. I can feel the ocean water cooling me down already.” I looked over at my sister. Her hair was completely drenched with sweat, and she had turned a delicate shade of pink. I did not want to know what I looked like at the moment, but I knew my back was drenched, and I was probably sporting a sexy farmer’s tan.

Abuela came outside with two glasses of water as we were admiring a job well done. Rehydrating my body had never felt so good.

“So are you ready for the beach, *Abuela*?”

She made a face. “*Ay, hoy no. Me duelen las rodillas hoy. Vamos mañana.*”

Her tone was nonchalant as she casually snuffed out my light at the end of the tunnel. She didn’t even see my face drop because she went back inside so quickly.

Issy had missed the recent most unfortunate development because she had gone to the shed to find a trash bag. “Why the face?”

“We’re not going to the beach anymore.”

She looked like a small child who had dropped her ice cream on the floor.

“What? Why not?”

“A bunch of crap. Because *Abuela*’s knees hurt.”

We spent the rest of that day moping around like we had just discovered that Santa Claus didn’t exist. *Abuela* sarcastically commented on how enthusiastic we looked walking around the house with such chipper smiles, but my sun-burnt shoulders were hurting me too much to pay attention to her.

Chapter 10

What is that noise? The sound of the thunder and rain outside made for a mesmerizing lullaby, but I realized the noise that had awoken me was the sound of doors being slammed and clanging pots and pans. I groaned involuntarily as I reached for my cell phone; it was 12:30 p.m. My whole body ached as it remembered yesterday's intense labor, and the sounds from outside my door got louder. *Uh-oh*. I recognized those sounds as expressions of anger; she was obviously not happy, but I chose to temporarily ignore it by putting my pillow over my head, a seemingly easy action that actually caused my sun-burnt shoulders a lot of pain.

Issy, on the other hand, seemed to be oblivious to the tension waiting right outside our door. I was about to warn her that *Abuela* might not be too happy with us at the moment for sleeping in so late, but she was too quick. I felt her jump up from the bed and walk through the door.

It sounded a lot worse than I expected as an explosion of angry, rapid-fire Spanish made its way to my ears. It shouldn't have taken *Abuela* that long to yell at her for sleeping in late, so I got out of bed to see what the fuss was about. I walked into the kitchen to see my grandmother red-faced and my sister crying.

"Why deed ju come to Puerto Rico?" *Abuela's* loud raspy voice echoed in the small kitchen.

It sounded like a trick question, but I decided to answer honestly.

"We came for vacation, for spring break. To relax and go to the beach and..." Apparently my honest answer was not the correct answer.

"¡No! ¡Viniste a visitarme y pasar tiempo conmigo! Ju came here to make mai life ghappy! But ju two are just spoiled and lasy, and ju don't know any-ting!"

I could feel my face flush with anger as she went back to angry Spanish to describe in detail everything that was wrong with me and my sister. According to her, we were the worst granddaughters anyone could hope for. We were “espoiled” because it was obvious to her that we had never worked for anything in our lives, we were wasteful because we took longer than five minutes to shower and used more than three sheets of toilet paper when we went to the bathroom, and we were “lasy” because we didn’t get up at 6 o’clock every morning like she did.

I bit my tongue so hard that I could taste blood as she bad-mouthed my mother. It was all my mother’s fault, she said, that we were the way we were. Our mother, she said, had coddled us and had not taught us about life. Life was all about suffering, and according to *Abuela*, we had never suffered a day in our lives, making us ignorant. She stopped short of calling us stupid, but I knew she wanted to. I could see all the yelling was tiring her out, but she wasn’t quite finished. *Abuela* did us the favor of informing us that nobody would want to marry us because we were so ignorant and a disgrace to our race because we weren’t able to cook a proper meal in thirty minutes.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen in a state of shock gazing off into space as she got in my face with her grand finale. She was so close to me that I could smell the mixture of tobacco and baby powder radiating from her as she ended her tirade with the ironic statement that we did not know the value of family or how to properly treat them. *Abuela* was so agitated by the end that she was shaking, and she stormed out the front door to smoke a cigarette on her porch.

Issy was still sniffing in the corner, and I went to put my arm around her. “Iss... You okay?”

Sniff, sniff. “Yea... Natalia, why is she so mean?”

“Because she’s a jerk, and she’s mean ‘cause she’s old and nobody cares what she has to say.”

“And how could she say all those mean things about Mami, her own daughter?”

“I don’t know, Iss, I really don’t.”

I was still processing what had just happened as I held my sister, and the more I thought about it, the angrier I became and hot tears ran down my face. Ignorant, lazy, spoiled, unmarryable... The woman had spent five days with us, and now she was the expert on our lives? And how dare she insult Mami like that? *Abuela* had no idea about all the crap Mami had dealt with, and how she was still such a good person and good mother despite it all.

We spent the rest of that day in our room. Ramón came by a couple of hours later to tell us that dinner was ready. I told him that I wasn’t hungry and that Issy was sleeping. He tried his best to coax me out of the room and said that *Abuela* was sad and that she really wanted to see us and spend time with us. But I told him I was feeling a little sick and that I had better stay in bed.

Even though it was still raining the next morning, I didn’t sleep in as long as I had the day before. I went into the kitchen at the more respectable hour of 9:30 a.m., greeted *Abuela* with a less than chipper “*Buenos días*,” and ate my breakfast without another word. She was unusually quiet and opinion-free that morning, even when I didn’t finish the food on my plate. It was apparent to both of us that we had given up on each other. I had given up trying to please her because nothing I did was ever good enough, and she had given up trying to correct my apparently horrible character and misplaced values. The only one who seemed unfazed by everything that had happened was Issy.

After the yelling and the crying and the anger, Issy made an even bigger effort to be nice to *Abuela* and listen to everything she had to say. *Abuela* responded unexpectedly well to Issy's sudden burst of affection. *Abuela* spent hours talking and complaining to Issy about life, and then she would make her favorite desserts afterward. Having to listen to someone who had only negative things to say for that long would have driven me crazy, but Issy seemed to genuinely enjoy listening to her (even though I am quite positive she enjoyed the sweet perks even more). While I was counting down the days until I could return to going to class every day and studying every night, Issy was actually sad that we were leaving.

It had been raining off and on since the morning of the incident, so we had spent most of our trip in the house or on the porch, and I was going a little stir-crazy. It was Saturday night, the night before our departure, and Ramón had put on some *salsa* and *merengue* music to make the night seem more festive. I was so excited to leave that most of my things had been packed since the night before. While packing, I had come across my beautiful, still brand-new bathing suit and lamented that the fact that I was going to be returning from spring break in Puerto Rico, and the only thing I had to show for it was burnt shoulders. So because all my stuff was airport-ready, I currently had nothing better to do than to watch Issy move without rhythm in her unsuccessful attempt to dance to the music. I was relieved when she finally asked Ramón for assistance.

“Ramón, can you teach me how to dance?”

“*¡Claro, mi cielo!* Ju move jor feet like thees and then like thees.” My sister had clearly displayed her lack of Latin dancing skill, but with Ramón's arms guiding her every movement, she was actually soon dancing salsa quite impressively.

“Natalia, look! I can dance!”

I resisted the urge to tell her that it was really Ramón who could dance and gave her a reassuring smile instead.

“*Ven cariño, baila conmigo.*” Ramón was attempting to get *Abuela* to dance with him, but she gave him a “you are such a child” face, which he proceeded to ignore.

“*¡Ramón! ¡Dije que no!*” But it was too late; *Abuela* had become a victim of Ramón’s smooth moves as he took her in his arms and skillfully twirled her across the room. She couldn’t resist him, and from the peaceful, content expression on her face, she seemed to be truly enjoying herself despite her earlier objections. They danced the next two songs until *Abuela* decided she had to go back to cleaning the kitchen.

As Issy continued to pester Ramón to teach her more moves, I sat there contemplating the scene I had just witnessed. For the duration of those two songs, *Abuela* was a different person. For a whole ten minutes, she had turned back into a carefree young girl; she was...happy. If she was happy only during those fleeting moments, the thought struck me that it meant that she was unhappy the rest of the time. That was no fun. What had happened to turn her into the mostly unhappy, angry person that she was now? It was the first moment that I had experienced anything close to empathy or pity for my grandmother in the two weeks that I had been there; but then I remembered how she had made my past weeks hell and any positive emotion toward *Abuela* evaporated. Only a couple more hours to go...

Our flight was departing at 4:30 a.m., so when *Abuela* and Ramón dropped us off at the airport at 3 a.m., I was hoping they would write off my unenthusiastic good-bye as early morning tiredness. Issy was actually getting teary-eyed as she said good-bye to *Abuela*, and I politely kept my eyes from rolling to the back of my head.

Spring break was over, and I could not have been happier.

Chapter 11

I felt so icky from travelling that the only thing I could think about when I got back to my room was getting clean. For the first time in two weeks I was able to take a long, hot shower without fearing for my life, and doing laundry and putting things away in my very own room would never be the same mundane activity again. I realized that in my joy of being back in non-hostile land, I hadn't talked to my mother. I had called her when we had landed, but the call had gone straight to voice mail. I searched for my mother's number hurriedly, suddenly desperate to talk to her.

"Hello?"

"Mami! Hi!" I was so happy to hear my mother's voice that I almost felt like crying.

"My baby! Ay, *mi niña*, it's so good to hear your voice! Are you back at school?"

"Yea, our flight got in a few hours ago, but we just got to my room at school about an hour ago. Issy's already asleep on my bed." My sister was going to stay with me for a few days because her spring break had not ended, but I told her not to get too comfortable in my Egyptian cotton sheets because tonight she would be sleeping on the air mattress.

"I am so glad to hear that you two are back safely! So...*cuéntame*. How was it?"

Honesty or diplomacy? I decided to be tactfully vague. "Umm...it was okay."

"Just okay, *mi niña*?"

"Well..." If I didn't talk about it now, it was bound to come out as word vomit later. So much for tactful vagueness. "Actually, Mami, I had a terrible time."

"You did? Why?"

"Mami, *Abuela* hates me so much!" I proceeded to tell my mother the awful story of *Abuela*'s tirade and all of the events that had led up to it. As I told her how *Abuela* thought we

were good for nothing spoiled brats, the tears of frustration I had pushed back when *Abuela* had yelled at me came spilling out.

“I really did try, Mami, I promise, but everything I did was wrong somehow. I just don’t get why she had to be so mean for no reason.”

“*Ay mi’ja*. I am so sorry. I just talked to *Abuela*, and she said that she had a wonderful time and that she loved having you two there, but I guess I should have known that something like this might have happened.”

“Really?”

“There are a couple of things that you have to know about your grandmother to understand where she is coming from. I know she can be a lot to deal with at times, but you can’t take what she says personally.”

What? My tears stopped, and I found that my nostrils were starting to flare. “Mami, how can I not take everything that she said personally?”

“Just hear me out, Natalia. You have grown up in the United States among many privileges and blessings that the old generation that *Abuela* grew up in did not. She grew up very poor on a farm in Puerto Rico, and because the family had so many kids, she went to school only until she was ten. She really wanted to keep studying, but the family’s financial situation did not allow for it.”

I started to feel a little sorry for *Abuela*, but I was still angry. “Okay, but what does that have to do with me?”

“*Mi niña*, it has everything to do with you, just listen. It was her desire to study and make a better life for herself that drove her to work hard and harder. She eventually moved to New York where she worked for years cleaning houses and doing whatever other work she could. It

was there that she met your grandfather, another Puerto Rican working in New York. She loved him so much, and then she had me and your *tía*. But then he went back to Puerto Rico and married her best friend instead.”

That threw me for a second. Of all the things to have in common with my grandmother, best friend betrayal was something that I was not expecting. “Wow, that really sucks.”

“Yes, it does. And her biggest downfall is that she has never forgiven him. Even after all these years and even though she loves Ramón, she has never been able to let go, which is perhaps why she can come off as a hard lady. But that is beside my point. Something you need to remember is that it is because of the sacrifices made by *Abuela* when she was young that you are where you are today. And she does love you, you know.”

“What? Mami, she doesn’t even know me, and I promise you, from what she knows now, she hates me and thinks I’m the worst person ever!”

“She does love you, *mi niña*. You are her flesh and blood and that creates a bond stronger than you realize. *Abuela* may be a little backwards at times, but in her mind she says these things because she thinks she’s helping you. Believe me, I know, she’s my mother. Her method may not be the best, but when I realized it was because she loved me and wanted me to be the best person I could be, I was able to truly start appreciating everything she said. What she doesn’t really understand is that the some of the expectations for women are changing, but she is actually very proud of you and all the things that you have been able to accomplish.”

“If you say so, Mami.”

“Do you know that you and *Abuela* are quite similar?”

The supposed similarities in our driving styles instantly came to mind, but I quickly wrote it off. I knew that whatever my mother was about to say she was intending as a positive thing, but I guessed I wasn't going to find it very encouraging. "Umm...really? How so?"

"You both care for people and your relationships a lot more than you pretend to."

I guess that was true about me, but I had a hard time believing that about *Abuela*. "Okay, I guess."

"You both are very intelligent, probably more intelligent than the rest of the family."

Thinking back to the way *Abuela* haggled for the right price, whipped out her knowledge of the law when necessary, and played strategy skills games very perceptively, I could see how that was true; I certainly wasn't going to deny that fact about myself. "Okay, you're right about that one. How else?"

"You are both extremely sensitive and because of that have a hard time forgiving others."

"I am not sensitive!" Ouch. As the words exited my mouth, I realized I had just confirmed my mother's keen observation. "Well...I'm not that sensitive, am I?"

"*Mi'ja*, yes, you are. And that is okay. There is nothing wrong with being sensitive; you just have to be careful not to hold a grudge."

"Well...I guess..."

"You know I tell you these things because I love you."

"I know."

"Okay, well, I'll let you get back to unpacking your things. Keep your spirits up, and remember what I told you."

"I will. Bye, Mami, I love you."

"Love you too, *mi niña*. Bye."

Logically, I knew my mother could be right about the similarities between me and *Abuela* but then again she could be wrong, so I clung to that possibility. And I knew I shouldn't hold grudges, but Mami wasn't there when *Abuela* said the hurtful things that she said; I couldn't help still being angry at her.

Chapter 12

Thinking back, I didn't know why I thought it would be a good idea for Issy to stay with me for the remainder of her spring break. I knew that the second half of the semester was going to be crazy, but for some reason I had not taken that into consideration when I told my mother I would entertain my baby sister for a few days.

After about a day of having to juggle re-immersing myself into the world of school and keeping my sister from flirting with all the college boys, the stress was getting to me. When I came back in between classes to grab a book, I nearly fell flat on my face as I tripped over my sister's shoes that were currently living on my floor; Issy, of course, did not even notice because she was still soundly asleep.

"Issy! Issy, wake up!"

"Hmm?" I could see signs of life as her eyelids fluttered.

"When I get back from class, I need you to be ready to go because we're going to dinner with some of my friends. And I need you to pick up your stuff so that I don't die walking through this room next time. Okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll be out of class in two hours, so you have plenty of time. Issy! Did you hear me?"

"Yes! I'll be ready, sheesh."

Two and a half hours later I was running back to my room. Talking to my professor after class had taken longer than I expected, but I guess that meant that Issy had an extra half an hour to finish getting ready. My friends were used to me being fashionably late, so as long as we left right away, we would be fine.

Two seconds after I opened my door, I felt myself get red with anger. I saw my room almost exactly as I had left it two and a half hours before. The only things that had changed position were my sister (she had migrated to lounging on my bed instead of on the air mattress) and the location of my favorite hazelnut chocolates (before I left, they were safely uneaten on my shelf; now they were most likely in my sister's stomach as she was surrounded by a sea of golden wrappers). My sister, who had been giggling on the phone before I walked in, quickly ended her call with a frantic "I'll call you back later."

"Issy, what is this?" It was a little difficult to control my heavy breathing as I really tried to contain my anger.

"Natalia, I'm so sorry! I didn't realize what time it was, so I called Robbie to talk for a couple minutes. I was telling him all about our trip, and I guess I lost track of time! And I got a little hungry..." Her voice trailed off as she saw me looking at the mess of candy wrappers. "I'm sorry!"

My efforts to keep my anger in check failed as I felt the outburst coming on. "Issy, what the heck! You're sorry? What were you thinking? You even had an extra half an hour to clean up and get ready, and here you are, still in your pajamas with chocolate all over your face, and this place is still a mess! Honestly, Issy, I don't understand what was so difficult about what I told you!"

"Ok, I'll be quick, and I promise when we get back that I'll clean up my..."

I later realized this was one of those times where I was speaking without thinking, but at the moment I could not keep the volume of my voice from escalating. "Yes, you promise, but a promise from you doesn't really mean much. I mean, seriously, if you can't handle something as simple as keeping track of time and keeping your face clean, then I don't know what to tell you!"

You need stop being so freakin' irresponsible and do something with your life! When you get older, nobody is gonna want to deal with an irresponsible, lazy..."

I stopped abruptly as I heard my voice echo down the hallway, and I realized I was yelling. And then I saw my sister's face. Her expression looked strangely familiar; her eyes were big, and her mouth was slightly turned down, like she was trying to keep from crying. She looked scared and sad at the same time. Then the horrifying truth hit me; it was the same exact look she had on her face when *Abuela's* tirade had taken place.

"Iss..."

"I'm really sorry, Natalia." I saw a tear roll down my sister's face.

What had I done? "Oh, man...Iss, no, I'm sorry. I don't know why I said all those things."

Instantly weighed down with guilt, I enveloped my sister in a hug and apologized profusely. Issy quickly forgave my outburst and by the time we went out to dinner she had completely forgotten it (the good food and the cute college boys probably helped). I blamed my uncalled-for nastiness on stress, which was partly true, but I knew that I was still angry about the *Abuela* situation, and I was taking it out on my sister. For the rest of the day, all I could think about was the look on Issy's face.

Thinking about it all day led me to the conclusion that Mami was right; *Abuela* and I were very alike. As the thought of how I had glimpsed my future and it was not a happy sight was eating me up inside, I remembered what my mother used to tell me and Issy when we were little whenever we would fight with each other. "Being angry is okay. It's what you do with that anger that counts. If you cage it away and constantly feed it, eventually it will grow and grow and grow until it grows out of that cage and consumes you entirely; so just let it go!"

At that point, Mami would roar and growl like a wild animal and tickle us at the same time, making us forget whatever it was we had been fighting about. Issy had apparently learned that lesson a lot better than I had. I knew I needed to make sure that I let the anger go and get on with my life, but knowing what I had to do and what attitude I had to aspire to didn't make putting it into action any easier; I wasn't sure if I even knew how to let go.

After a couple of weeks had gone by, I had gotten to the point where I could laugh and joke with my roommate about what a crazy grandmother I had. I was really trying to focus on my schoolwork, which appeared to have multiplied, so other than the occasional "my grandmother is so ridiculous" story, I tried my best not to dwell on the events of my wasted spring break; trying to forget about them was the closest thing to letting go I could muster. This was usually easy given my current level of distraction provided by my class load, but flashbacks of spring break did come up unexpectedly every once in a while.

In my Social Psychology class, the chapter we happened to study right after break was about the values and expectations instilled in individuals of different cultures. All I could think about during those class periods was how, according to *Abuela*, the values and expectations of my culture meant nothing to me and how no Hispanic man would ever marry such an un-Hispanic girl. The week after that, it just so happened to be "Resolving Anger" week in my Fundamentals of Counseling class, and the teacher's lecture was verbatim what my mother had told me in my childhood about dealing with my anger.

So when I walked into my Creative Writing class a couple of days later and took a look at the warm-up journal exercise the professor had written on the board, I rolled my eyes because I knew I should have been expecting what was there. As an introduction to short story writing, the

subject of today's class was conflict, and Professor Hayden had posted the following writing prompt on the board: "Whether it is a duel between sworn enemies or the internal debate between shoulder angels, conflict is the main driving force in any story. Freewrite about a recent conflict in your life, and try to analyze why that conflict came about."

I really did not feel like writing about this particular subject; but I could see Professor Hayden eyeing me and my blank piece of paper suspiciously, so I started writing whatever came to my mind.

Here goes nothing...I really don't know what to write about conflict except that it sucks. And when I say that "it sucks," I really mean that she sucks. And when I say "she," I mean Abuela. I know I should be over it by now, and I kind of am, but at the same time I'm not. I honestly don't know why the conflict came about, except that she just likes to fight over nothing. I know she's had a not-so-easy life, but I don't really understand why she had to be so mean, why she had to be so hard on me. She didn't care to get to know me because she thought she knew everything that I was supposed to be. I guess I am not the granddaughter she had expected me to be. Funny how different, skewed expectations can totally screw up any relationship. I guess we were both at fault in that aspect. She had expected me to be a traditional Puerto Rican woman on the verge of domestic goddess-dom, and I had expected her to understand that I was not. We both let our expectations get in the way; I guess we are alike like Mami says. So that means if I'm not careful, I'll be just as angry and bitter as Abuela when I get old...scary thought...I really don't want that to happen...

As Professor Hayden called the class to order and lectured about the different types of conflict, I felt a little lighter. The past few minutes of writing had been strangely therapeutic. I had uncovered the underlying issue with my interactions with *Abuela* and my mother's words

about letting go made a little more sense, and all it had taken was pen and paper. I had much more writing to do in my journey of letting go of my anger, but this was a solid start.

Excited about my epiphany that allowing words to flow onto a page was really helping me let go, I took out a fresh sheet while sitting in the middle of Creative Writing class for the bit of writing I knew had to come next.

Dear Danny and Julie...